

Fort Egypt
Near Luray
Page County
Virginia

HABS No. VA 200

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORIC AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Virginia

Historic American Buildings Survey

Prepared at Washington Office

FORT EGYPT
Near Luray, Page County, Va.

Owner: J. C. Burner of Luray

Date: 1730-50

Builder: Unknown, probably Abraham Strickler.

Condition: Fair

Description: Built of dressed logs, this house was superficially altered about 1840. The alterations included the addition of a wing (recently removed), new fenestration, a weatherboarded cover to the log structure, and a new roof.

The building is practically square, being 32' x 36' and is two full stories in height. The roof is now a low hip, but was formerly much higher and was undoubtedly gabled. The line of the original roof may be seen on the chimney. The front and rear are two very broad bays in width, the west side is three bays and the east is nondescript, the wing having formerly abutted it. All sash is six over six lights and is 19th century. Where the wing has been removed the log structure can be seen. Each log is roughly 18" in width and 9" thick; is dovetailed at the corners and the joints are chinked with clay. The building is exceptionally large for log construction and with the Garch Fort near Salem may be one of the largest log structures in Virginia.

The basement is of field stone and encloses some of the most remarkable features of the house. These are the cellars, built as defenses and for refuge against the Indians. The north cellar runs the whole width of the house and is roughly half its depth. In the north wall are three splayed openings that were presumably loopholes for rifles. They vary in size from about 7½" x 10" to about 10" x 12" and are at shoulder height. A similar opening occurs at the west end. At the east end is a broad sheathed door. The floor of this cellar is dirt, the walls are roughly plastered on the stonework and the ceiling is of 6" x 8" beams, set about 30" on centers. The spaces between are filled with nogging of clay and straw applied to cleats sprung between the beams. This is a rare occurrence of a Pennsylvania-German usage and may be the sole example in Virginia. There are probably numerous examples in Pennsylvania, including those at the Kloster, in Ephrata. In the Moravian settlement in North Carolina are other examples. A stair formerly descended into this room at the southeast corner, but is now dismantled. The cellar in the southwest corner is vaulted

in stone as a final refuge against Indian attack. Such cellars are found in several early houses in the Massanutten area. It is 15'-1" x 13'-4" and 7'-6" high to the crown of the vault. The west wall is pierced by two arched loopholes and the south wall by a shaft presumably for ventilation. The thickness of the vault is about 14" and was designed to protect the occupants in case the structure above should be burned. In the vault are built wrought iron hooks with corresponding recesses in the end wall to hold poles. These were evidently for hanging supplies. The door leading to the cellar is sheathed with an arched head cut out of a solid timber.

The superstructure retains much of its original form in spite of the 19th century changes. In plan it is four rooms, two large on the south side, and two smaller narrow ones on the north. The chimney is entirely built into the S. E. room, which is the kitchen. The fireplace is now blocked up, but the original lintel remains. This is 13 x 18 and is about 14' long. The other fireplaces in the chimney may not be original, the rooms originally being heated by stoves. Such stoves were common in Pennsylvania-German building and were often just five plate receptacles for hot coals which were introduced through the back of the fireplace in the adjacent room. There is a small recess in the chimney opening into the northeast room.

The structural system of the floors was compound, but by the removal of the girder has been simplified but evidently not to the detriment of the structure. Originally 9 x 11 timbers spanned from the gable ends to the chimney, but these have been removed. On these rested 6 x 8 floor joists 30" on center. These latter were delicately chamfered with stops at the wall. They are continuous from wall to wall so the removal of the girders was possible, and was probably occasioned by their deep projection from the ceiling.

The interior doors are largely of walnut and are sheathed with wrought iron strap hinges and latches. The trim is merely a mitred board run with a cyma at the outside edge in the style of a chamfer. The battens are moulded and spiked and clenched to the boarding. The door hardware exhibits such Pennsylvania attributes as the spread plate at the butt and tulip form terminals.

When the larger double hung windows were inserted most of the evidence as to the exact form of the former openings disappeared. However, part of the original trim of the window over the front door remains and from it and the adjacent wall area the size 1'-10 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 2'-10" was deduced. The opening was horizontal, probably unglazed and covered by a wooden shutter. The other openings were probably similar and occupied approximately the same location as the present windows on the south and north parts. There is no evidence of windows in the east side and the alterations make it difficult to

determine the fenestration of this side. Under the location of the former girder is a cut in the structure which might indicate an old opening.

The internal partitions of the house are all sheathed, some in pine and some in walnut. The ceiling of the southwest first floor room is also boarded over and is painted a green which may be old.

There are two flights of stairs, both all of winders. One is situated in the southeast corner of the building and may not be original. The other ascends in the northwest corner of the northeast room, but is entered from the adjacent room. This stair is disused at the present time.

Additional Data: The Massanuttan community was settled about 1727 by emigrants of German antecedents from Pennsylvania. Adopting Penn's policy of friendship and fair dealing with the Indians, the two peoples became good friends. Later settlers were less wise and the Indians were not always treated fairly. French intrigue brought them into the "French and Indian War" during which many raids were made against the Massanuttan and other trans-montaine communities from 1758 to 1766-7. The settlers had to provide means for protecting themselves against the Indians. This usually took the form of houses with defensive features including vaulted stone basements which usually were built over a spring. These were presumed to afford protection even if the house were burned but it is doubtful if they would do so. At the burning of Fort Roads in 1764 the family's documents and money which were concealed in the stonework of the cellar, escaped destruction. The family caught unaware were unable to reach the cellar and were mostly killed. After the fire, observers mentioned the charred grain in the ruins which recalls the fact that the German settlers often filled the upper rooms or lofts with grain and other supplies. This may explain the spacious second floor and original attic at Fort Egypt.

The date of construction of the house has never been settled. It may post date the purchase of the land by Abraham Strickler from Jacob Stover but it should be observed that a house was mentioned in the deed of December 16, 1735.

Reference: "Massanuttan", by Harry Strickler (1924)

Thomas I. Waterman

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